

DRAFT - FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY

2010/2011 PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION PLAN

INTRODUCTION: With over 15 parks and 3 beaches covering 200+ acres, 4 tennis facilities (24 courts), a world-class public golf club, 2 marinas, a swimming pool complex, 12 athletic fields and over 100 recreational programs, Westport's Parks & Recreation resources play a significant part in enhancing the quality of life for Westport residents of all ages.

MISSION STATEMENT – *The mission of the Parks and Recreation Commission is to protect, enhance and promote The Town of Westport's Parks and Recreation facilities and resources, establishing policies, setting fees, and recommending regulations that enable all Westporters to take advantage of these resources.*

2010-2011 RECOMMENDED PRIORITIES:

The Commission has identified a set of priorities that are designed to complement the goals reflected in the Westport 2007 Plan of Conservation and Development. While we believe all are important, we recognize that our ability to implement these priorities will depend on budget dollars, and manpower. The identification of these priorities and gaining stakeholder input is the first step in creating a set of achievable objectives to be accomplished in the next budget year. We expect that this will be an interactive process, and that this document will continue to evolve to reflect the needs and priorities of the community.

1. Increase Public Awareness/Outreach

The Commission seeks to promote opportunities for the use and enjoyment of Westport's parks, facilities and programs through:

A. Public Participation

- a. Actively work to increase public participation in Commission meetings through publishing meeting dates and agenda items on local websites and newspapers;
- b. Work with senior citizen and youth groups to get feedback and form partnerships on targeted goals;
- c. Outreach to local not for profits and private businesses to form public/private on targeted goals and initiatives.

B. Website Enhancement

- a. The Commission strongly supports the enhancement of the current Website to provide ready-access to information on locations, use and fees;
- b. Provide direct links to Golf and Tennis Reservations, Programs and Events, etc.

C. Signage Improvements

- a. Recommend a list of prioritized signage improvement projects and investigate a public/private partnership that will assist in signage improvement.

2. Advocate for the Protection and Improvement of Passive Use Park Properties and Open Spaces:

The Commission seeks to protect and improve the extensive inventory of passive-use parks and open spaces in an effort to attract more users, improve safety, promote recreation, preserve open space, enhance community character and reveal Westport's natural beauty. The Goals for 2010/2011 include:

A. Park Connections and Inventory

- Where appropriate, the Commission will support the creation of pedestrian links between parks and recreational facilities in accordance with the recommendations of the 2007 Westport Plan for Conservation & Development. Included in this are the specific recommendations of the Downtown Plan Subcommittee of the Town PIC:
 - Creation of public green spaces and a river walk “as part of the transformation of the Downtown into a diverse, pedestrian-oriented community”
- Through signage and pathway improvements, promote the existing greenbelt that surrounds Westport's downtown: ie - from downtown, to the riverfront, around Levitt, through the farmers market, to Baron's South/Senior Center, through Winslow, then back to downtown. Promote this pedestrian walking/hiking opportunity in downtown area.
- Perform an inventory (including GIS maps & data) on Westport's park properties and open space, including but not limited to:
 - Pedestrian access – adequacy/limitations;
 - Parking - adequacy/limitations;
 - Opportunities for educational use and/or special event use;
 - Infrastructure condition/needs;
 - Current signage and suggested improvements.

B. Winslow Park Improvements

- Form partnership with interested group or individual to improve pedestrian access from adjoining residential and commercial neighborhoods. Access should be safe for walkers/joggers and for individuals pushing strollers.
- Identify opportunities for improved access (including signage) between downtown Westport and Winslow Park.
- Develop identity as more than the “dog park”

C. Baron's South Plan

- Advocate for the basic development of park trail network;
- Improve signage which includes trail maps, picnic fields/locations and connections to Winslow, farmers market, Levitt, etc.;
- Clear overgrowth and open up vistas to enhance park's visibility, accessibility and sense of security;
- Create small graveled parking area off Compo Road (adjacent to First National Bank parking lot);

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- Revisit dog access to Baron's South property (leashed versus unleashed, or continued prohibition);
- Team with local interest group to accomplish basic park improvements.

D. Saugatuck River Access

- Identify opportunities for increasing public access and usage of Saugatuck River:
 - Support the Downtown Implementation Planning Sub-committee's recommendations for improvements to riverfront access, including:
 - Creating a riverwalk extending from Gorham Island to Levitt peninsula;
 - Shifting Jesup Green to include expanded river frontage.
- Form partnerships with local not for profit and community interest groups (Levitt Pavilion, Friends of the Library) to encourage improvements to pedestrian path around Levitt Pavilion.
- Review opportunities for riverfront kayak "parking" near downtown.

3. Review Needs and Recommend Investments in Active Park Properties, Recreational Facilities and Infrastructure:

The use of Westport's existing recreational properties and facilities continues to intensify. The Town should strive to adequately maintain and improve recreational facilities and active park properties.

▪ Longshore Park:

Golf Club:

- Recommend performing an updated Master Plan for the Longshore Club;
- Recommend replacement of the golf course Halfway House – secure necessary funding; pursue a public/private partnership if/as appropriate.
- Review options for upgrade the building at Longshore Club Park housing the pro shop, golf cart storage, locker rooms and operations office for the golf course.

Pool:

- Review cost and options for converting Longshore pools to be more green i.e. less chemicals;
- Review options for improving the landscaping around Longshore pool.

Longshore Inn:

- Review Longshore Inn contract and provide recommendations to enhance impacted Longshore facilities.

▪ Compo Beach

- Review current demand, uses, policy and needs for renovation for bathhouse clubhouses.

▪ Tennis facilities

- Expand public awareness of Tennis workshops, programs and facilities;

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- Create a tennis advisory committee with the purpose of increasing awareness, efficient use of facilities and input on fees.
- **Athletic Fields**
 - Identify and prioritize opportunities for maximizing field utilization, including lighting;
 - Publish field use policy.
- **Marina, Boat Slips & Dry Docks**
 - Evaluate fees for boating
 - Evaluate need for structural improvements
- **Maintenance facility - Parks & Recreational Department**
 - Review options for screening or relocation of maintenance vehicles and equipment to mitigate against negative visual impacts on otherwise scenic parkland.

4. Create public/Private Partnerships to assist in enhancing, protecting, and promoting the Town of Westport's Parks and Recreation facilities:

- Assist in the establishment of the Friends of Parks and Recreation;
- Collaborate with the Downtown Implementation Planning Committee;
- Partner with not for profit organizations such as GVI, WSA, and the Boys Scouts of America in implementing parks and recreation projects.

5. Explore New Revenue Opportunities

- Advertising
- Commercial Partnerships
- New/Enhanced Concessions

6. Establish fees and policies that minimize the financial impact of recreation facilities and programs on the general taxpayer while assuring that all offerings are affordable to those wishing to participate.

The Parks and Recreation Department budget is almost wholly funded by user/permit fees. During the last several years we have seen a significant increase in these fees and a decrease in taxpayer contributions, currently less than 10% of the total Department budget, which is a level much less than surrounding communities. To this end, Commission seeks to expand the revenue opportunities as well as ensure that fee structures and discount policies are consistent, reasonable and appropriate.

A. Private Use Fees

- Review each park property for potential for private use;
- Assess appropriate policies (including size) for each potential use;
- Establish fees for private use that are market-based and reasonable.

B. Program Fee Structure & Discount Policy

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- Review fee structure to ensure consistency across all programs regarding fee structure and discount policy.

C. Dedicated Funding Source

- Explore options for developing a dedicated funding source to fund parks maintenance and improvements.

7. Provide input and feedback to Recreational Programs

Westport Parks & Recreation Department seeks to continue to provide quality programs that accommodate all ages and ability levels and that are organized and supervised by qualified or professional personnel. The Commission seeks to provide ongoing support of the Recreational Programs through providing ongoing suggestions where appropriate.

- Continue to support scholarships.

8. Recommend Enforcement Strategies

As the use and enjoyment of all Town parks and recreational facilities increases, so will the opportunities for misuse. The commission should continue discussions on what regulations we want, and how do we want them followed.

9. Establish a Long Term Vision for the future of Westport's parks and facilities

The commission seeks to supplement the 2007 Town Plan with a longer term vision for the future of Westport's parks and facilities which may include items such as:

- Interconnected parks, facilities and significant town resources through the creation of pedestrian greenways (aka "emerald necklace").
- Boating, riverfront parks and extensive river pathways fully connecting the town to the Saugatuck river.
- River dredging to reopen the river as a navigable waterway.

Critical Open Issues

As a result of budget cuts, the Westport Parks and Recreation Commission is exploring future strategy choices for guiding the Parks and Recreation Department service offerings. For example, in fiscal year 2009-2010, 97% of the Parks and Rec budget, which includes the maintenance of all Town properties, along with Parks and Fields, was covered by the revenue from user fees. The Town tax revenue provides only 3% of the entire Department budget. As a result, the Parks and Recreation Department has had to reduce certain services, hours that facilities are open and/or programs to remain within budget constraints.

A fundamental strategic question under consideration of the Commission is the roles that Parks and Recreation facilities and programs play in the fabric of the Town of Westport. Whether the services provided through the Parks and Recreation Department be managed to maximize revenues - producing sufficient profit to subsidize other town services, or should the Commission pursue a strategy where programs are provided to benefit the greater good-as a community service - where fees are kept low enough to continue to be accessible to all residents, that anyone can afford. Strategic level issues such as these require input from citizens in town to shape the quality and types of services the Parks and Recreation Department can and should offer.